

Overview of the Process for a Federal Response to a Natural Disaster

In an effort to provide better understanding of the process, the following document is intended to be a brief overview explaining how the federal government responds to natural disasters.

In 1988, the ***Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act***, was enacted to support State and local governments and their citizens when disasters strike. This law establishes a process for requesting and obtaining a Presidential disaster declaration, defines the type and scope of assistance available from the Federal government, and sets the conditions for obtaining that assistance. All incidents are handled at the most immediate organizational and jurisdictional level – local and State agencies are the primary response and recovery units for any disaster. Police, fire, public health and medical, emergency management, and other personnel are responsible for incident management at the local level. The National Guard, State Police, and other responding state agencies are coordinated by the Governor. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is tasked with coordinating the Federal response.

1. Pre-Disaster

- The Department of Homeland Security Operations Center monitors potential major disasters and relays warnings to States. When advance warning is possible, DHS may deploy and also request deployment of other Federal agency liaison personnel to a State Emergency Operations Center.
 - Equipment, supplies, and Federal personnel may also be pre-positioned just outside the affected area to provide immediate response as requested by the Governor.

2. Initial Response

- Immediately after an incident, local jurisdictions respond using available resources and notify State elements. During this response, localities should assess the situation and apprise the State of further needs.
- The State begins a review of the situation, mobilizes State resources, and informs the DHS/FEMA Regional office of actions taken.

- The Governor activates the State Emergency Operations Plan, declares a state of emergency and requests a State/DHS joint preliminary damage assessment to determine if a Presidential declaration is justified.
- The Governor must also provide an estimate of the Federal assistance that will be required.

3. Post-Emergency Declaration Response – Federal Organization

- DHS establishes a Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) staffed by their regional personnel to coordinate field activities and deployment of an Advance Emergency Response Team.
- The Advance Emergency Response Team then assesses the impact of the event, gauges immediate State needs, and makes preliminary arrangements to set up operational field facilities.
- If regional resources are overwhelmed, DHS may employ a National Emergency Response Team comprised of 16 federal agencies which becomes FEMA's primary vehicle for coordinating Federal activities.
- A Federal Coordinating Officer is appointed by the Secretary of DHS on behalf of the President to direct the National Response Team.

4. Federal Response/Recovery

- Primarily, FEMA provides operational and/or resource coordination for Federal support assisting States and localities in their response and recovery efforts. In general, States are compensated by reimbursable programs as dictated by the Stafford Act.
- FEMA also acts as the sole coordinator of the involved Federal agencies, and FEMA emergency volunteers, tasking them with specific missions examples include: DOD assets for search and rescue, medical assistance, and transportation of commodities; Army Corps assets for channel clearing, dredging, debris removal, and flood control; DOT assets for transportation needs, HHS assets for health and disease control, Red Cross for evacuee housing and care.
- As the need arises, FEMA also becomes a contractor procuring services from private vendors to assist in cleanup and recovery efforts.
- FEMA acts as the provider of most public and private assistance as dictated by the Stafford Act. The Stafford Act lays out the conditions for which public and private assistance may be available. http://www.fema.gov/rrr/dec_guid.shtm provides an overview of available Federal disaster assistance programs.

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